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REVIEW ARTICLE / DERLEME YAZISI

A Systematic Review of Early Maladaptive Schemas and Addictions

Erken Dönem Uyumsuz Şemalar ve Bağımlılıklar: Sistematik Bir Derleme

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Abstract:

The purpose of this systematic review is to examine the effects of early maladaptive schemas on addictive behaviors using a systematic approach. Accordingly, the study searched the PubMed, PubMed Central (PMC), Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, DergiPark, and YÖK National Thesis Center databases for studies published between 2006 and 2026. The search process employed the keywords "early maladaptive schemas," "schema therapy," "substance addiction," and "behavioral addiction." Based on the predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria, a total of 27 studies addressing the relationship between addiction and early maladaptive schemas were included in the review. The findings indicate that early maladaptive schemas play a determining role in the development of addictions. Specifically, the schemas of abandonment, emotional deprivation, defectiveness, mistrust/abuse, and social isolation appear to be prominent across various types of addiction. The reviewed studies demonstrate generally consistent and significant relationships between early maladaptive schemas and different types of addiction. In this context, while schemas such as abandonment, emotional deprivation, defectiveness/shame, mistrust/abuse, and social isolation show consistent associations with various addictions, the connection between the insufficient self-control schema and impulsive and compulsive behavioral patterns is also addressed. In conclusion, the findings suggest that early maladaptive schemas are associated with the development and maintenance of addictions. Accordingly, targeting early maladaptive schemas in addiction interventions may contribute to both prevention and treatment processes.

Keywords: Substance addiction, Behavioral addiction, Early maladaptive schemas.

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Öz:

Bu derleme çalışmasının amacı, erken dönem uyumsuz şemaların bağımlılık davranışları üzerindeki etkilerini sistematik bir yaklaşımla incelemektir. Bu doğrultuda araştırma PubMed, PubMed Central (PMC), Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, DergiPark ve YÖK Ulusal Tez Merkezi veritabanlarında 2006–2026 yılları arasında yayımlanan çalışmalar taranmıştır. Tarama sürecinde "erken dönem uyumsuz şemalar", "şema terapi", "madde bağımlılığı" ve "davranışsal bağımlılık" anahtar kelimeleri kullanılmıştır. Belirlenen dahil etme ve dışlama ölçütleri doğrultusunda, bağımlılık ve erken dönem uyumsuzluk şemaları arasındaki ilişkiyi ele alan toplam 27 çalışma derlemeye dahil edilmiştir. Bulgular, erken dönem uyumsuz şemaların bağımlılıkların gelişiminde belirleyici bir rol oynadığını göstermektedir. Erken dönem uyumsuz şemalarında, özellikle terk edilme, duygusal yoksunluk, kusurluluk, güvensizlik, istismar ve sosyal izolasyon şemalarının bağımlılık türlerinde daha yüksek olduğu görülmektedir. İncelenen çalışmalar, erken dönem uyumsuz şemalar ile farklı bağımlılık türleri arasında genel olarak tutarlı ve anlamlı ilişkiler bulunduğunu göstermektedir. Bu bağlamda, özellikle terk edilme, duygusal yoksunluk, kusurluluk/utanç, güvensizlik/istismar ve sosyal izolasyon şemaları farklı bağımlılık türleriyle tutarlı ilişkiler gösterirken, yetersiz özkontrol şemasının dürtüsel ve kompulsif davranış örüntüleriyle olan bağlantısı ele alınmaktadır. Sonuç olarak, erken dönem uyumsuz şemaların bağımlılıkların gelişimi ve sürdürülmesiyle ilişkili olduğu gösterilmektedir. Bu doğrultuda, bağımlılık müdahalelerinde erken dönem uyumsuz şemaların hedef alınmasının hem önleme hem de tedavi süreçlerine katkı sağlayabileceği düşünülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Madde bağımlılığı, Davranışsal bağımlılık, Erken dönem uyumsuz şemalar.

Introduction

Addiction is defined as an individual's tendency to repeatedly, uncontrollably, and compulsively engage in a particular substance use or behavior (Özdemir & Türker, 2026). Accordingly, addiction manifests itself in two main forms: substance addiction and behavioral addiction (Bilge, 2026). Substance addiction is characterized by the uncontrolled use of chemical substances such as alcohol, nicotine, drugs, or prescription medications, and includes both physical and psychological dimensions (Elik & Karadeniz, 2025). Behavioral addiction, on the other hand, is a type of addiction that does not involve substance use but emerges through the compulsive repetition of certain behaviors (Grant et al., 2010). In this context, examples include gambling, internet and video gaming, shopping, exercise, eating, and sexual behaviors (Petry et al., 2018).

Both types of addiction are associated with similar reward mechanisms; by affecting the dopaminergic reward system, they can lead to loss of control and negatively impact the individual's quality of life as well as social, academic, and occupational functioning (Elik & Karadeniz, 2025; Karakuş et al., 2021). One of the main characteristics of addiction is the development of tolerance; over time, the individual needs to use higher doses of the substance or repeat the same behavior more intensely to achieve the same effect (Çakıcı et al., 2019). This process leads to the gradual progression of addiction (Elvig et al., 2021).

Moreover, when attempts are made to terminate the addiction, withdrawal symptoms may appear (Arslan, 2024; Çakıcı et al., 2019b). Withdrawal symptoms can be physical or psychological in nature and may increase the tendency to continue the addiction (Karabulut, 2023). Thus, addiction is a multidimensional phenomenon associated with physiological, psychological, and neurobiological processes (Fang et al., 2022).

Cognitive and developmental factors also play an important role in the development of addiction. In this context, early maladaptive schemas are enduring beliefs about oneself and the world that develop from negative experiences and unmet core emotional needs during childhood and adolescence (Koluaçık et al., 2026; Young, 2011). These schemas are shaped through interactions with significant others and influence emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses (Kömürcü et al., 2016). Indeed, research shows that these schemas can increase the risk of developing addiction later in life (Çalışkan, 2020; İzci et al., 2022; Pilkington et al., 2024).

According to the classification by Young and colleagues (2003), maladaptive schemas are grouped under five main domains: disconnection and rejection, impaired autonomy and performance, impaired limits, other-directedness, and over-vigilance/inhibition (Erbaş, 2024; Vieira et al., 2023; Yaman, 2025). Each schema domain can affect an individual's emotional and social functioning in different ways, thereby increasing the risk of addiction (Erbaş, 2024).

In this context, the aim of the present study is to systematically review the current literature on the relationship between substance and behavioral addictions and early maladaptive schemas, evaluate the findings holistically, and offer recommendations for future research in the field.

Method

This study was conducted using a systematic review. A systematic review involves the selection of studies in the relevant field according to predetermined criteria, their detailed examination, and the structured synthesis of the findings (Karaçam, 2013). The study process was guided by the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) principles.

The literature search was conducted in PubMed, PubMed Central (PMC), Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, DergiPark, and the YÖK National Thesis Center databases. During the search, Turkish and English keywords were combined using Boolean operators. The keywords "erken dönem uyumsuz şemalar" (early maladaptive schemas), "şema terapi" (schema therapy),

"madde bağımlılığı" (substance addiction), and "davranışsal bağımlılık" (behavioral addiction) were used. Research published between 2006 and 2026 was reviewed for the study.

The obtained records were first evaluated for duplicates, and repeated records were removed from the dataset. The selection process was carried out in two stages: in the first stage, titles and abstracts were examined; in the second stage, the full texts of eligible studies were reviewed. The inclusion criteria for the studies were as follows: publication between 2006 and 2026; written in Turkish or English; peer-reviewed article or postgraduate thesis; examination of the relationship between early maladaptive schemas and any type of addiction; and full-text access.

According to the exclusion criteria, review articles, case reports, book chapters, publications without accessible full texts, studies not directly related to the subject, and scale development or adaptation research were excluded from the evaluation. Studies that did not meet these criteria were excluded from the review.

In the first stage, a total of 3,687 records were obtained from the following databases: PubMed (n = 1,045), PubMed Central (PMC) (n = 412), ScienceDirect (n = 786), DergiPark (n = 321), Google Scholar (n = 491), YÖK National Thesis Center (n = 100), Scopus (n = 287), and Web of Science (n = 245). The records obtained were first assessed for duplicates, followed by a review of titles and abstracts. As a result of this stage, a total of 3,467 records that were not directly related to the topic, were duplicates, or did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded. The full texts of the remaining 220 studies were examined in detail.

After the full-text review, 193 studies were excluded for reasons such as not being directly related to the research topic, being review articles, being scale development or adaptation studies, lack of accessible full text, or sample characteristics that did not meet the predetermined criteria. In the final stage, 27 studies that met the inclusion criteria were included in the systematic review. Details of the screening and selection process are presented in the PRISMA diagram (Figure 1).

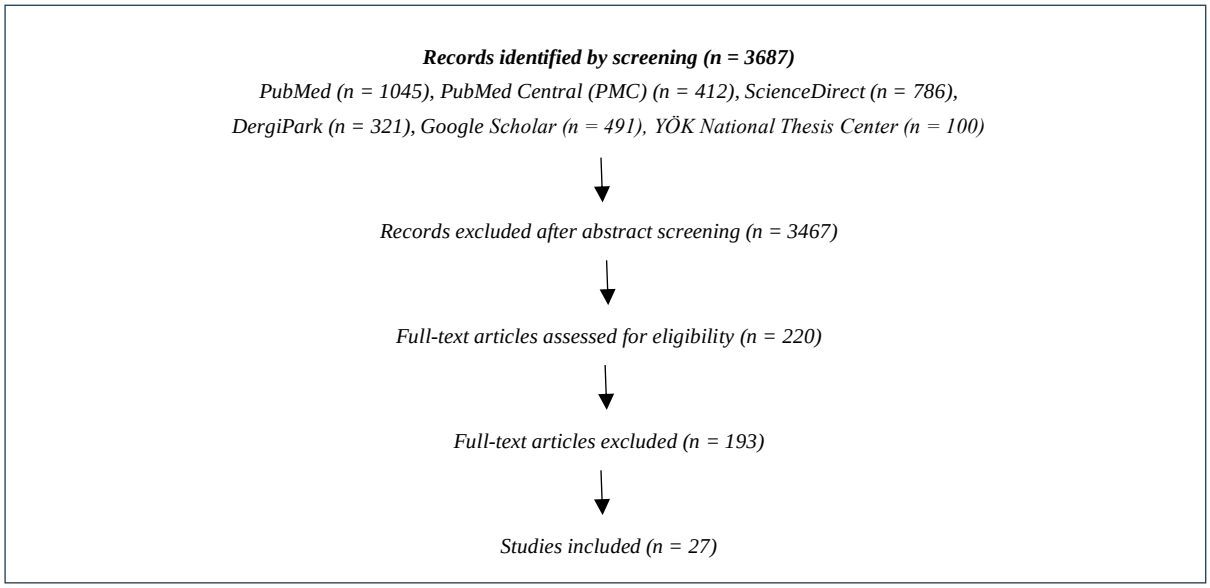
Records identified by screening (n = 3687)
PubMed (n = 1045), PubMed Central (PMC) (n = 412), ScienceDirect (n = 786),
DergiPark (n = 321), Google Scholar (n = 491), YÖK National Thesis Center (n = 100)
Records excluded after abstract screening (n = 3467)
Full-text articles assessed for eligibility (n = 220)
Full-text articles excluded (n = 193)
Studies included (n = 27)

Figure 1. *PRISMA Diagram*

Findings

Studies conducted on individuals diagnosed with addiction have been examined comprehensively across different cultural contexts. These studies were carried out in various countries, including Iran, Spain, Italy, the United States, Australia, Turkey, and Poland, with sample sizes ranging from 30 to 1,948 participants. In assessing early maladaptive schemas, the Young Schema Questionnaire or the Young Schema Questionnaire-Short Form was employed in the studies.

When the measurement tools used in the included research are examined, the Sexual Addiction Screening Test was used to assess sexual addiction; the Binge Eating Scale and the Yale Food Addiction Scale 2.0 were used to evaluate eating addiction and binge eating behaviors; and the South Oaks Gambling Screen was preferred for gambling addiction. Additionally, exercise addiction was measured with the Revised Exercise Addiction Inventory, internet addiction with the Internet Addiction Test and the Generalized Pathological Internet Use Scale, and smartphone addiction with the Smartphone Addiction Inventory.

Details of the studies included in the research are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Basic Characteristics of the Studies Included in the Research*

Source	Sample	Topic	Key Findings
Anderson et al. (2006)	Obese (n=52), CG (n=39)	FA	Obese individuals have higher total scores; especially social isolation, defectiveness/shame, and failure schemas are associated with obesity.
Razavi et al. (2012)	With SA (n=96), without (n=106)	SA	Individuals with substance addiction scored higher on many early maladaptive schemas compared to the control group.
Shorey et al. (2012)	Addicted (n=49), non-addicted (n=579)	GA	Problematic gambling was significantly and positively related to 12 of 18 early maladaptive schemas.
Shorey et al. (2012)	Female (n=289), Male (n=565)	BA	Women scored higher than men on 14 of the 18 early maladaptive schemas assessed.
Hacıomeroğlu et al. (2014)	Males (n=32), CG (n=31)	SA	Individuals with substance addiction scored higher on early maladaptive schema dimensions than controls.
Khosravani et al. (2017)	Male (n=194), Female (n=122)	SA	Among substance addicts, there is a significant relationship between early maladaptive schemas and emotional regulation difficulties.
Shajari et al. (2016)	University students (n=195)	IA	The five main domains of early maladaptive schemas were found to be related to internet addiction.
Azemat et al. (2016)	SA (n=30), CG (n=30)	SA	Individuals with sexual addiction had significantly higher Young Schema Questionnaire scores than controls.
Imperatori et al. (2017)	Women with FA (n=70)	FA	The severity of food addiction showed a strong positive relationship with all schema domains.
Anlı et al. (2017)	BA (n=206), non-BA (n=106)	BA	Individuals with alcohol use disorder differed from controls in terms of pathological narcissism and early maladaptive schemas.
Donnell et al. (2018)	Addicts (n=52), CG (n=70)	SA	Maladaptive schemas are more pronounced in opioid addicts and play a role in addiction development.
Basile et al. (2019)	Obese (n=48), CG (n=37)	FA	Binge eating behavior is significantly associated with all schema domains.
Aloi et al. (2020)	Female (n=378), Male (n=259)	FA, IA, GA	FA is higher in women and related to disconnection/rejection; IA is prevalent in youth and related to all schemas; GA is higher in men and related to autonomy/performance and limits.
Özlen (2020)	Male (n=102), Female (n=282)	FA	FA is associated with emotional deprivation, pessimism, social isolation/insecurity, enmeshment/dependence, and abandonment schemas.
Aloi et al. (2020)	With FA (n=50), without (n=45)	FA	FA is related to early maladaptive schemas. Binge eating is especially linked to emotional deprivation and defectiveness/inadequacy schemas.
Kahouei et al. (2020)	Addicted (n=215), non-addicted (n=135)	SMA	Students with social media addiction had significantly higher mean scores in all domains of early maladaptive schemas.
Rankin et al. (2021)	Male (n=98), Female (n=38)	EA	Exercise addiction was related to schemas; self-sacrifice and insufficient self-control/self-discipline were not significant.
Arpacı (2021)	Male (n=179), Female (n=481)	BA	Social isolation/insecurity, approval-seeking, and abandonment schemas are associated with smartphone addiction.
Altuner (2021)	Offenders (n=300)	SA	As substance use frequency increases, individuals score higher on early maladaptive schema dimensions.
Ostovar et al. (2021)	Male (n=301), Female (n=413)	IA	Significant positive relationship between internet addiction and early maladaptive schemas.
Efrati et al. (2021)	Offender (n=103), CG (n=68)	SA	Significant relationship between sexual addiction and early maladaptive schemas.
Cudo et al. (2022)	Male (n=282), Female (n=391)	SMA	Problematic Facebook use is associated with insufficient self-control/self-discipline and approval-seeking schemas.
Cudo et al. (2024)	Male (n=282), Female (n=391)	GA	Early maladaptive schemas, such as inadequacy and dependence, are associated with problematic gaming.
Efrati et al. (2023)	Adolescent (n=1948)	SA, BA	Early maladaptive schemas are associated with substance use and behavioral addictions in adolescents.
Cudo et al. (2025)	Female (n=565), Male (n=489)	BA, GA	Positive relationship between alcohol use disorder, gaming addiction symptoms, and early maladaptive schemas.
Monton et al. (2026)	Female (n=1566), Male (n=412)	SMA	Emotional mechanisms rooted in early maladaptive schemas are associated with problematic social media use.

Note: *SA: Substance Addiction, FA: Food Addiction, AA: Alcohol Addiction, SA (CB): Sexual Addiction, IA: Internet Addiction, GA: Gambling Addiction, OGA: Online Gaming Addiction, BA: Behavioral Addiction, EA: Exercise Addiction, SMA: Social Media Addiction, CCD: Compulsive Sexual Behavior, CG: Control Group, SM: Social Media*

Studies on substance use disorders show that early maladaptive schemas are especially related to the domains of disconnection/rejection and insufficient self-regulation. Donnell et al. (2018) reported that early maladaptive schemas play a significant role in the development and maintenance of addictive behaviors in opioid and other substance use disorders. Khosravani et al. (2017) found that individuals with substance use disorders have particularly higher levels of abandonment, emotional deprivation, and social isolation schemas. Hacıömeroğlu et al. (2015) demonstrated that substance addicts scored higher than the control group in all early maladaptive schema domains. Cudo et al. (2025) stated that, when evaluated together with gaming addiction and similar behavioral patterns, schemas were significantly associated with substance use in a similar way, and that this relationship may vary by gender.

Findings related to alcohol use disorder indicate that early maladaptive schemas are determinants at both cognitive and emotional levels. Anlı (2017) found that individuals with alcohol use disorder differed significantly from the control group in terms of early maladaptive schemas and pathological narcissism. Cudo et al. (2025) showed that there are positive relationships between symptoms of alcohol use disorder and early maladaptive schemas, and that these relationships may vary according to gender.

Studies in the field of gambling addiction show that early maladaptive schemas are particularly associated with the domains of disconnection/rejection and impaired limits. Shorey et al. (2012) reported that individuals with gambling addiction have high levels of early maladaptive schemas, and that these schemas may vary depending on the type of addiction. It was also reported that women scored higher than men in some schema domains.

Behavioral addictions (such as internet, social media, gaming, smartphone, and exercise addiction) are among the addiction groups most strongly associated with early maladaptive schemas. Arpacı (2021) demonstrated positive relationships between smartphone addiction and schemas of social isolation, insecurity, abandonment, approval-seeking, and insufficient self-control. Ostovar et abandonment, emotional deprivation, defectiveness/shame, mistrust/abuse, and social isolation. In behavioral addictions, the disconnection/rejection schema domain is more prominent; whereas, in substance and alcohol addictions, a broader, multidimensional profile involving multiple schema domains emerges. In gambling addiction, the schema domains related to disconnection and impaired limits are particularly notable.

Discussion

In this systematic review, the relationships between early maladaptive schemas and various types of addiction are addressed within a holistic framework. The studies reviewed generally show consistent and significant relationships between early maladaptive schemas and addictive behaviors. Early maladaptive schemas are considered cognitive-emotional patterns related to individuals' personality development, emotion regulation processes, and interpersonal relationships (Shorey et al., 2012). These schemas are reported to be associated not only with personality disorders, anxiety, and mood disorders, but also with various types of addictions (Aloi et al., 2020).

al. (2021) found that, in internet addiction, the schemas of abandonment, insecurity, social isolation, emotional deprivation, and defectiveness are particularly prominent. Shajari et al. (2016) stated that all early maladaptive schema domains showed significant relationships with internet addiction. Cudo et al. (2022) found that the inadequacy/dependence schema was the strongest predictor of problematic gaming behavior, and that enmeshment and subjugation schemas were more pronounced in men. In the same research group's study on problematic Facebook use, insufficient self-control and approval-seeking schemas were found to be positively associated. Rankin et al. (2015) reported positive relationships between exercise addiction and schemas of impaired limits, subjugation, approval-seeking, and grandiosity. Monton et al. (2026) revealed that early maladaptive schemas affect problematic social media use through emotional mechanisms and that gender differences play a significant role.

Studies on eating behavior and obesity indicate that, especially, the emotional deprivation and defectiveness/shame schemas are prominent. Aloi et al. (2019) found that emotional deprivation and defectiveness schemas were particularly pronounced in obese individuals with binge eating disorder. Anderson (2006) showed that obese individuals scored higher on early maladaptive schemas compared to the control group. Basile et al. (2019) reported significant relationships between eating behaviors and the schemas of abandonment, defectiveness, social isolation, and dependence/inadequacy. Imperatori et al. (2017) emphasized that the schemas of rejection, impaired limits, and other directedness play an important role in food addiction. In a Turkish sample, Özlen (2020) identified significant relationships between food addiction and the schemas of emotional deprivation, social isolation, and abandonment.

Overall, the findings indicate consistent and positive relationships between early maladaptive schemas and both substance and alcohol addiction, as well as behavioral addictions. The most frequently associated schemas are

In this context, the present review brings together and evaluates the relationships between different types of behavioral addictions—such as internet, gambling, gaming, social media, eating, sexual, and exercise addictions—and early maladaptive schemas. The reviewed studies show that there are generally positive relationships between addictive behaviors and the subdimensions of the Young Schema Questionnaire. In particular, the schemas of abandonment, emotional deprivation, defectiveness/shame, mistrust/abuse, and social isolation/alienation are consistently related to different types of addictions (Cudo et al., 2024). Additionally, the schemas of impaired limits, other-directedness, and hypervigilance/inhibition have also been reported to be associated with some addictive behaviors.

These findings suggest that early maladaptive schemas can be evaluated in the context of cognitive-emotional processes associated with addictive behaviors (Efrati et al., 2023). In particular, the insufficient self-control schema has been found to be associated with addictive behaviors in many studies included in the review. The insufficient self-control schema is defined as a structure characterized by difficulties in regulating impulses, a tendency toward short-term pleasure-seeking, and a disregard for long-term

consequences (Young et al., 2003). Various studies have emphasized that these features may be related to addictive behaviors (Shorey et al., 2012). Addictive behaviors are generally defined as repetitive, compulsive patterns of behavior that continue despite negative consequences (Özlen, 2020).

Conclusion and Recommendations

When the relationships between early maladaptive schemas and addictive behaviors are evaluated, it is generally found that there are consistent and positive associations between these variables. In particular, schemas of abandonment, emotional deprivation, defectiveness/shame, mistrust, and social isolation may be related to different types of addictions; additionally, impaired limits, other-directedness, and hypervigilance schema domains may also be connected to addictive behaviors. These findings suggest that addictions are related not only to biological or environmental factors, but also to individuals' emotion regulation processes, impulse control, and interpersonal needs.

Various studies have proposed that early maladaptive schemas may be associated with the onset and maintenance of addictive behaviors. Accordingly, using schema-focused therapeutic approaches in treatment processes may contribute positively to interventions. Especially methods such as schema therapy, which target individuals' core emotional needs, are considered to support the clinical process.

However, the fact that most of the reviewed studies are based on cross-sectional designs, the widespread use of self-report tools, and limitations in sample sizes restrict the generalizability and causal interpretation of the findings. Therefore, future research should increase the number of longitudinal and experimental studies, use larger samples, and utilize multiple data sources. Additionally, the heterogeneity of the samples included in the studies and the inclusion of groups with different ages, genders, and clinical characteristics may limit the generalizability of the findings. It should also be considered that cultural differences can influence both how early maladaptive schemas are expressed and the manifestation of addictive behaviors.

Declarations

Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate
Not applicable.

Consent for Publication
Not applicable.

Availability of Data and Materials
Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions
Z.D.B. contributed to conceptualization, methodology, investigation, data curation, and writing of the original draft. A.Ç. supervised the preparation of the manuscript and contributed to writing—review and editing. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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